

PLAIN THOUGHTS.

SUBMITTED TO
PLAIN UNDERSTANDINGS.

UPON A
PREVALENT CUSTOM

DANGEROUS TO THE

ESTABLISHMENT.

England. church
18

Chelmsford :

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PREFACE.

IN these days of increasing Innovation, as well religious as political, so collaterally if not immediately subversive of our excellent Establishment, it may well become every real Friend of the Constitution to exert his best endeavours, however feeble, to counteract the Attempts of any description of Men who, from Party views, or from ill-grounded private Prejudice, are desirous of effecting a Change, either in Church or State.

Should the Publication of the following Tract tend at all to promote, in any class of people, the respect and veneration due to our Established Form of Divine Worship, its chief end will be most fully answered.

The best way to promote it is by
sound Doctrine and a Pious life
to the Apostolic Directions by the
of the highest Authority

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SUBJECTS more immediately political are daily so well and ably handled by men of such superior genius and understanding, that it might be weakness here to enter into a discussion of them ; and the object of the following remarks is chiefly for the purpose of noticing the very great zeal shewn by a particular description of people to estrange or seduce those who have been from their infancy brought up in the principles of our Mother Church, to become adherents to other doctrines and another form of worship, which is to make, as they pretend, 'the comers thereunto perfect'. It is against such delusive suggestions, and such specious temptations, that the middling and the lower classes of people should be forewarned and prepared. It may be worth while first to consider for a moment What one essential doctrine, laid down by the Established Church from the authority of Scripture (which we are all taught to search) is there, which the meanest capacity cannot very well comprehend and reduce to practice, by the explanation of her own Ministers, without the aid of other officious teachers, who are, in many cases, much more ignorant than their hearers ? Is it fair to object the common term 'Priestcraft' to the regular Clergy ? For what powers do they pre-

tend to exercise but what are conducive to the happiness and well-being of mankind? To cultivate their minds and correct their manners; to reclaim the wicked and comfort the feeble-minded; to promote as much as in them lies, peace, love, and universal righteousness; to pray to God for his people, to bless them in his name, and to dispense to them his ordinances for their spiritual comfort and edification, are the particular duties of their station. And let it now be asked, not only of the pious Christian, but of any serious man, What is there in any of these things which can give just or reasonable offence? For we may safely believe, not only the opinions of the English Church to be those of the Gospel, but we may without arrogance think also her system of Government and Worship agreeable to the spirit of the primitive ages, and conducive to good order, piety and virtue. Surely then, in the Established Church of England, Priestcraft is impossible: the Word of God is in this happy country open to all; liberty of conscience, in following the tenets of his ancestors, is a just object of toleration for every man, however desirable it might be that we were all of one mind. And perhaps 'tis fitting that a Christian should worship God in that manner which shall be most suitable to his conscience, provided that be done without offence to his neighbour; that is, without causing him to fall from his own steadfastness, "or to be carried about with every wind of vain doctrine by the sleight and cunning craftiness of those who either lie in wait to deceive," or more openly and avowedly are compassing sea and land to make profelytes.—(Matt. c. xiii. v. 15.) Let us dwell a little upon this latter observation; the truth of which is as abundantly evident in these days as in the time of the Scribes and Pharisees of old, whom our Saviour reasonably and strictly remonstrated with. The circumstances of Missionaries, or Itinerant

Preachers, * going about from place to place to instruct and 'enlighten' the lower classes of people, is too notorious to be denied; and it has been warmly, as falsely, or ignorantly contended by the abettors of these industrious retailers of the gospel, that they visit only hamlets where there are no churches, and those villages chiefly where no Clergyman resides, and that they avoid those places where there are pious and zealous ministers in the church! So far from this being the real state of the case, the contrary is the fact; and multitudes could bear testimony that in several instances these Missionaries are the more diligent and active the less their pious labours are requisite. So far from their being actuated solely by the good motives which they pretend—of instructing, reforming, and converting the poor villagers, are there not, on the contrary, many instances of these preachers coming into places where the inhabitants have every opportunity of being duly instructed by exemplary parish ministers, † and

* Such as these, under pretence of knowledge, of which they have not the first rudiments, often enter parishes where, till then, the greatest harmony prevailed, and on their own speculations, without the concurrence of any respectable householder or other parishioner, register some cottage, outhouse, or chamber, pretended to be for the use of Protestant Dissenters; this practice they carefully conceal from the inhabitants of the village, none of whom would probably be allured under such a denomination. Having proceeded thus far, and brought a small number of followers from other parishes, curiosity and the very novelty of seeing such men transformed into preachers, entice those who have the most itching ears, to whom (from the general perversity of human nature, sometimes aided by the remembrance of some former dispute on matters of property) the abuse of the ministry soon becomes agreeable. Thus breaches are made which can seldom be healed, and prejudices are implanted which no human skill can eradicate, because these men have the presumption to impose their senseless rant upon the unsuspecting multitude, as proceeding from the peculiar and miraculous operation of God's holy spirit. (See Report from the Diocese of Lincoln).

† For proof of this, see Rev. F. Wollaston's Address to his Parishioners of Chiselhurst, Kent, a pamphlet one must regret had not been rather more adapted to the comprehension and reading of the lower class, and more correspondent with its very particular title-page.

have the advantage (if they will indeed reap it) of attending church twice in the day, with other opportunities for divine worship; and who, rather than have no hearers, bring their congregation with them, and when they have disturbed a parish by their unwelcome visits, and been foiled in their object of greatly adding to the number of their hearers, will court opposition for the sake of urging their old popular complaint of being 'persecuted for righteousness sake.' It is no less well known, that cottages have been, and now are licensed for the purpose of what is termed 'preaching the gospel,' whose inhabitants have been stimulated and employed by persons notorious for their enmity to the regular establishments of their country, † and the easy modes likewise by which these licenses are obtained, have much tended to increase the number of them, especially since the passing that salutary Act of Parliament entitled the Sedition Bill, by which the difficulty of publicly discussing political or disseminating pernicious principles is necessarily increased. ‡ These and other considerations which might easily be urged, will lead many dispassionate people to think much of that to be true which has been stated in a pamphlet lately written by a Dissenting Minister, (Mr. David Rivers) who, from motives of conscience and conviction, from the existing circumstances of the

† It is one of the no small grievances arising from these daily increasing different places of worship, that it affords a pretext to profane and irreligious persons to traduce our holy religion, and under the favour of so many places of worship, to absent themselves from all.

‡ A very sensible writer has lately observed, There is a lying spirit gone forth amongst the people, which has seduced them from the paths of truth into dark and dangerous ways; that political retrospect which was some time since discoverable among the lower orders of the community, had no sooner received a check from the hand of government, than it was converted into religious turbulence; when the stream was stopped in its original direction it burst out into a new channel, and in its present course it may be considered as more alarming than in its first.

times, and from a sense of his duty as a loyal subject, has been induced to separate from those with whom he had been brought up and educated, and amongst whom he had occasionally preached. This author, for a series of years, had made it a point to study their political character and bias, and certainly had those opportunities of knowing them which a stranger could not possibly have had.* He acknowledges, indeed, that there are individuals among them, and even among their teachers whom he respects and reveres, whose loyalty he would vouch for, and even be security; but adds, (with what justice need not here be determined) "that number is very small;" and then takes notice of a circumstance, which indeed does somewhat stagger, that a Dissenting Minister, who had been arraigned only a day or two before at the Old Bailey, was suffered to preach at the most respectable meeting-house the Dissenters have in the metropolis † the Sunday following.—But to return to our Itinerant Preachers, whose progress, it is thought, may ere long be checked from a promised motion in Parliament, of which notice has been given by a respectable Member of the House of Commons. § Ig-

* See also a Sermon by another Dissenting Minister, (Mr. T. Martin) preached at a Meeting House, Broad-street, January 1798, and which has brought down the vengeance of his hearers upon him.

† Carter-Lane, St. Paul's.

§ And no doubt can be entertained but that such treacherous intrusion into parishes calls for the serious attention of the Legislature; both because of its threatening to undermine and dissolve all useful connection between the Clergy and their Parishioners, and also because whilst places of meeting may be thus registered without enquiry, and without conditions of any kind, one cannot see any obstacle opposed to any men or combination of men who might at any time wish to propagate not only various lesser heresies, but socinianism, deism, or even atheism, in a parish yet untainted with any of these destructive tenets; and one cannot but dread but the same means might with equal efficacy be employed to sap and overturn the State as well as the Church; and in one diocese (Lincoln) instances of both kinds have been produced, sufficiently flagrant to excite serious alarm in the breast of every true patriot and of every sincere believer of Christianity.

norant and bold fanatics, it is well known, are at this time holding forth, in loud declamations, throughout almost every part of the kingdom; and it might not, perhaps, be difficult to prove, that this practice is frequently, in many parts of the world, turned to political account, by unsettling the minds of the lower orders of the people, proposing to them the delusive sweets of Equality, and making them very jealous of the power or possessions of their superiors and employers; and as to their religious principles, (however good or steady before) raising doubts in timid minds, and making not only the doctrine and example, but the very persons and situation of their regular pastors odious and suspected. The respectable Member † above alluded to, expressed his surprise and regret at being applied to in his magisterial capacity, by a lad of 17 years of age, for a license to preach the Gospel:—This circumstance will not appear so extraordinary to those who have taken the pains to examine the register of names of persons who had taken out licenses for the above plausible purpose, and have seen that many who had so done were obliged to make their signatures by mark (unable to write) and many who could write had misspelled their own names. Now such a proof of their incapacity to teach others, in such momentous points as Faith and Practice, cannot but alarm every friend to true religion and his country; at the same time that the more moderate and educated part of the Dissenters must (one would think) highly disapprove of such practices, as hurtful or disgraceful even to their own cause. It is moreover a fact well known, that for many months in the summer 1798, a private soldier from one of the militias (said to be the Warwickshire) was going about from place to place through a most populous diocese, drawing together crowds of people to witness the novelty of such impudence; and it was as well known

† Mr. Michael Angelo Taylor.

how long a time this continued a nuisance to the serious and peaceable inhabitants (Dissenters as well as Churchmen) of such villages or towns as this military divine (if the expression be allowable) thought proper to visit. We may here reasonably ask, if it can possibly tend either to the Glory of God or the good of man that such glaring instances of religious mockery should be suffered to pass on before our eyes silently or disregarded? And, without entering into the question, Who should be the first to stem the torrent of such notorious evils? It may be conceded, that if the Member who has in his place already observed upon the liberties presumed upon under the sanction of the much-abused Toleration Act, is really in earnest (and there seems little reason to doubt it), he highly merits the thanks of every good man! and surely thousands may wonder if he has not the support of the Minister and his friends, and above all, if he does not receive material assistance, in the execution of his laudable endeavours, from those (in the Upper House)* whose situation and calling must afford abundant means of giving him the best information upon the subject he has promised to bring forward in Parliament. This indeed is a measure which must prove highly serviceable, not only to the interest of Religion, but likewise of the State. For it would be no difficult matter to point out the manifest danger there is to so many as are tempted to yield to the vain fancies of such as pretend that they are inwardly inspired, or privately called to preach the Gospel; and if

* The Bench of Bishops; and it is much to the honour of the Bishop of Lincoln that he has so earnestly co-operated with some very respectable Clergy, in taking into consideration the state of Religion, in a district of his Lordship's diocese, as well as the best mode of promoting the relief and practice of it; and of guarding, as much as possible, against the danger arising to the Church and Government of this kingdom, from the alarming increase of profaneness and irreligion on one hand, and the false doctrines and evil designs of Fanatic and Seditious Teachers on the other.

some,* who have had really some advantage of learning or education can yet descend to encourage such hurtful fanaticism; no wonder that the ignorant and bold should often transgress the bounds of decency and order; for all must be concluded strictly deserving such a description, who impiously invade the sacred office, and deal out their indigested doctrines with presumptuous freedom. From such it is expedient to warn the multitude that they turn aside; and for this reason, amongst many others, because, as was before observed, they will most likely be told by such persons, what will prejudice them from attending their own holy Church, § confuse their thoughts, and unsettle their minds. As, for instance, in many of these private conventicles, and by these self-formed teachers, they will hear the whole body of the regular Clergy occasionally held forth in a contemptible light; the weakest and most presumptuous pleas advanced for the preference of their own fraternity, and the Church mode of preaching objected to, as not being under the influence of the Spirit of God; a favour they arrogate to themselves in a high degree; and one proof they give of this is, because it has not the test of extempore delivery: the most silly and falsest argument; as if every good man did not ask God's blessing upon his professional labours; and that it was not as necessary to a written discourse as to every religious exertion whatsoever; or as if the value of God's gifts of understanding and his blessing in the mighty benefits derived from good education, did not

* To spread and preach what is called the Gospel carries with it a plausible sound, well calculated to deceive the unwary; and thus, in some instances, persons of respectability, both for piety and character, are brought to countenance such proceedings.

§ Separation from the Church of this country is daily increasing, funds are established, and writers employed to propagate and support the cause of Schism. (See Daubeney's Guide to the Church.)

form an eminent portion of Divine favour.* It might easily be determined which has the best mark of the Divine concurrence and gracious aid; a discourse partaking of all the essential ingredients to render it safe, intelligible, and to God's honour and the important interests of his servants, or a jumble of indigested subjects, needless repetitions, and low comparisons, often interrupted by actual deficiency, both as to utterance and matter, notwithstanding the boasted assistance of the Spirit; and, to speak most charitably, so often intermixed with offensive observation, and downright nonsense,† that if the whole was taken down and shewn to the inspired orator, at a little distance of time, he would be justly ashamed of the composition, most probably disown it, nor venture to allow it those signs of that immediate unerring influence which can never be the author of confusion and absurdities. But even were these discourses connected, eloquent and without any of the objections above mentioned, which may be the case with some, where thought, talent, and study distinguish the performance, yet this is no more a proof of the Spirit being more particularly concerned in producing these compositions, than in one from manuscript, the effect of deliberation, judgment, and correction; for men have their various natural talents. And which bids fairest to furnish profit to the hearers? That which is an object of respect, and will bear examination, or that which is often an object of ridicule, and can stand no sound enquiry? The decision may safely be left to any impartial person.

* It may be proper to observe that some of these reflections have been collected from a very sensible discourse (printed about ten years since) by an exemplary Divine of the present day.

† It was the observation of a very old Divine, that it would exceedingly humble a good man, could he, after he had prayed, be made to see his prayers writ down with interlineations of all the vain and impertinent thoughts which had thrust themselves in among them.

—The greatest hypocrite may have the natural faculty of a good memory, and the knack of extemporising; may be possessed of audacious confidence and strong nerves; whilst the most holy man alive, and the most religiously informed, could not be prevailed upon to deliver a sermon without his notes, in public, upon any consideration; and (though perhaps with every qualification for the task but constitutional audacity) might possibly fail, was he to attempt it. But, if this man's life is upright, if his example is profitable, if his doctrine is founded upon evangelical principle, is he to be degraded as not being yet "taught of God?"

—None but a fool or a fanatic would assert this. But there is a great deal in early habit, as well as peculiar gift; and it will not admit of doubt, but that men of genius might, in a degree, avail themselves of the advantage of prompt delivery in the pulpit, as in other oratory, was it the custom to have it early practised, and that without the additional effect of Inspiration; though in solemn charges, perhaps, the more circumspect and guarded method is best.—It is further to be lamented, that persons who pretend to a more than common zeal and concern for religion, should imagine that they do God service by the most indiscriminate abuse of the whole Body of the Clergy, by uncharitable misconstruction of actions perfectly innocent, by aggravating little faults incident to the infirmity of human nature in all orders and conditions of men, or by publishing with triumphant exultation, and circulating with indefatigable activity, those instances of grosser misconduct of which one would trust the proportion is much less among those of this profession, than among the like number of men in any other class of society, and by maliciously ascribing such faults and misconduct to the whole Body. Nor does public Church Service a whit better escape the severity of these censorious judges.—But it should be here noticed

that these remarks are not so much meant to apply to such of our Christian Brethren (the Dissenters of this age) as have been educated for generations under a different ecclesiastical form, but to those daily Separatists, the encouragers of those wandering shepherds who are going about from fold to fold to entice such sheep as may for a time have strayed from their own proper flock.

Another danger from attending these irregular teachers is, the pernicious influence of the doctrines that are maintained by them. Now as many of these persons who take upon them to go preaching about the country, are under no proper jurisdiction, and consequently out of the reach of remonstrance or reproof; and as in the Scriptures there are many things hard to be understood, they bend and twist and level these points according to their own particular opinions and uncultivated understandings; for having no knowledge of the original language in which they were at first conveyed, and being above the consideration of particular times, circumstances, and occasions, which lead to just discovery of their design and application, they interpret them severally as the letter strikes upon their unqualified judgment, or give a sense of their own where they are incapable of finding that of the Scripture. For the truth of this perhaps one need only appeal to any persons who may have attended different orators of this stamp: what a confusion of notions, what perplexity of thought they have experienced from their *different* methods of treating the *same* thing—"teachers neither understanding what they say nor whereof they affirm."* From these causes the mind (as has been before observed) becomes unsettled; principles are at variance; and for want, in some in-

* 1st Timothy c. i. verse 7.

stances, of early and solid foundation (which would keep men steady to their Mother Church), they go in search of different information, get an habit and fondness for variety, are daily entangled in difficulties, and become less capable of relishing the plain and substantial truths, which those who run may read.*

The Commandment says, "Six days thou shalt labour and do all that thou hast to do ; but the Seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God." Industry in men's several callings, and the due care of their families and children, are duties that compose the greatest part of the trials of the labouring man, while he has health and strength : this includes honesty, of course ; and the gratitude due to God, for ability to discharge the task allotted to the several stations his wisdom hath appointed, is shewn by a regular and humble service to him in his House ; where, by the public sanctions of the laws, his worship is established, and a power to perform it dispensed to our fellow-subjects who have been educated purposely for that high office, and not where, by an imposition on the lenity of the Legislature, that liberty is usurped.

Men in acquitting themselves thus conscientiously, are no doubt serving God acceptably ; such a conduct further implies resignation to his will, and becoming praise for his mercy in affording them such a decent mode of serving him ; humanity, sobriety, and contentment in themselves, justice towards those who employ them, and good example to their neighbours. Now, every thing that interferes with the fulfilling of these necessary duties (let the plea be ever so plausible) is faulty and to be avoided : regularity and rest are the springs that afford strength and spirits for work ; if

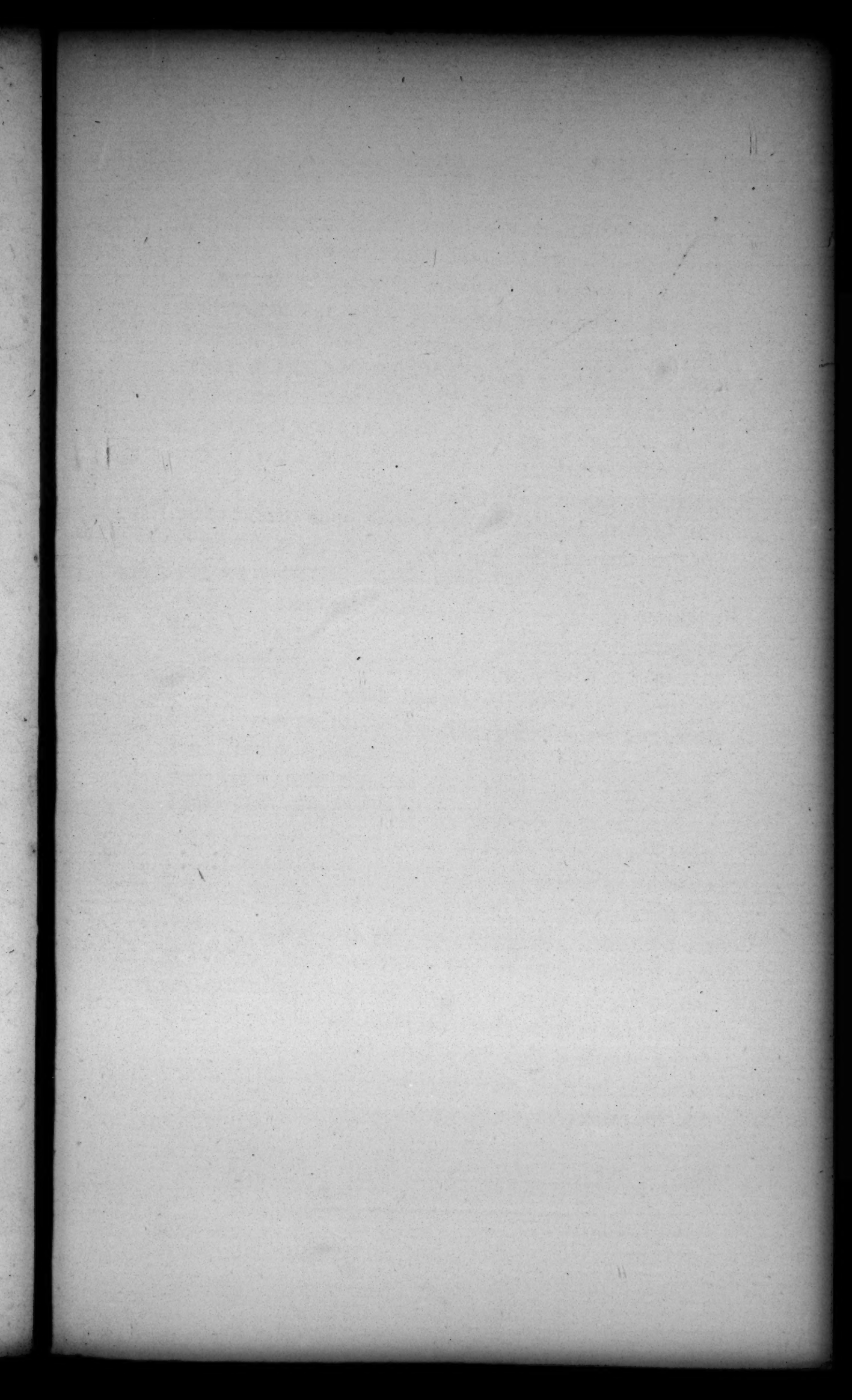
* Habak. c. ii. verse 2.

these times are broken in upon, by going some miles to hear a noisy preacher, and continuing there some hours, both mind and body must return fatigued, and the care required at home, of course, neglected; it must, in the nature of things, afford an excuse for some idleness the next day, at least an habit of neglecting their daily employments may be insensibly contracted, and, if the resources of support be lessened, their families must suffer proportionably. But “nightly preachments” are open to great objections, on other accounts, however defended by some pious motives: 1st. No exception of *any* persons can be made, with any degree of propriety, where the “word of God” is made the reason of assembling, which often brings together a strange mixture of characters; is sometimes the cause of rude disorder, and the profanation of the sabbath; and if this does not happen on the spot, all such meetings by night lead to a sort of riot, both in collecting and when they are dismissed, very inconsistent with a solemn assembly: again, as from the very principle of “Conversion” none can be refused, many, as before hinted, must be admitted, who (without any breach of charity) it is evident go with no one pious purpose—curiosity, perhaps, the least exceptionable design; and the familiarities and opportunities of temptation from the society of good, bad, and indifferent, in dark and solitary journeys, often lays the foundation of more vice than virtue; for it is well known, that these Sunday Evening Meetings afford very convenient opportunities for weekly assignations to many idle servants of both sexes. Before we close these remarks, it may be worth while just to notice a plea which has been urged in favour of attending these unlicensed meetings, that “it is the happy means of removing the dangerous alternative of frequenting public-houses;” but how very idle is this observation, for no truly good person will waste his

time and money, on the Lord's Day, in such courses, after regularly attending the public worship ; but the contrary, from what they are imagined to prevent, is frequently the consequence of these pursuits, when fatigue, society, and refreshment combine to lead them to these very houses : so that the end is often worse than the beginning. As for such as *can* read, whose children enjoy the same benefit, it is their duty, when they return from church, to pass a part of the remaining day at least in the useful exercise of the talents God has been pleased to bestow upon them ; these are "in themselves" little religious meetings, supported by propriety, sense, and decency ; and these are obligations which, as christian parents, masters and mistresses, it is incumbent on them to perform : and all men may be assured, that if they will follow good counsel uniformly, with an earnest desire to better their lives, and seriously lay to heart what may be collected by a regular attendance at the established church, and with a due spirit endeavour to practise it, using her prayers to help them forward in the task and trial of their lives ; if all this be done, from a real principle of love to God, a fear of offending Him, and a regard for the salvation of their souls, they will have passed the Sabbath-day religiously and profitably, nor need further instruction from any other minister or teacher whatever. So essential is it for the good of all christians (in these days more especially) to hold fast the form of sound words which they have heard, and, without wavering between two opinions, to stand fast and hold the traditions which they have been taught !



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